Meaningful Communicative Repetition

By Tim Murphey

I became aware of the need to recycle language in my own learning of Japanese. When I first came to Japan, I organized different lunchtime conversation partners for every day of the week. At first, I noted a great amount of useful material to learn but I wasn't using it often enough for it to become operational. Then I started telling each partner the same information. For example, on Monday I would tell my partner about my trip to Tokyo and get all kinds of help. On Tuesday I would repeat the story and get still more help and become more sure of myself. By Friday, I felt comfortable with the material and it seemed to stick in my brain. (Of course my Friday partner always thought I was much more fluent in Japanese than my Monday partner did!)

I learned that I needed to say the same thing many times to really operationalize it. If I waited for my environment to give it to me in the form of comprehensible input, I might wait a long time. So I started telling everybody I met my new idiom or proverb of the day. That is, I became proactive and I started giving myself the input that I needed by teaching everybody I met what I was learning. They would often explain things further and tell me how wonderful I was doing. Soon a few of the office staff began asking me what I had learned today. They were curious!

Too often I find my students understand explanations, exercises, and drills and only need more practice to really assimilate the material. I am happy that I use a lot of pair work in class, yet I still want more real use of the material. I realize from my own learning that saying the same thing more than once to the same partner is not real communication.

Here I describe ways to get students to use new language many times in real communicative situations within a short period. You can supply the content from your own lessons; I will describe only the process here.

Second Partners

By assigning students new partners after the initial pair work, I found that I could get more online use of the material right away. With their new partners, I tell them to either (*a*) repeat the original information or (*b*) tell their new partners what their first partners said. The first option, simply repeating the same information to a new partner puts emphasis mostly upon speaking and gives students opportunities to say things better the second time. The second option, telling their new partner what their first partner said, is a more demanding task that requires careful listening, understanding, and remembering. It makes students negotiate input more because they want to make sure they have it right when they tell it to their next partner. I usually begin with the first option and, when they are comfortable with the procedure, I add the second.

To recycle the information, the original pairs can be matched up again and asked to tell each other what they learned from their second partners. Thus, they will have used the information (patterns, vocabulary, etc.) at least three times.

Loud (Distant) Partners

In an effort to get students to speak up more and to get over their fear of being heard in public, I sometimes assign the role of second partner to someone a seat or two away. I tell them they can move their chairs to get eye contact, but they must remain the same distance apart. Thus, they all have to speak in loud voices (and sometimes even louder if I turn up the background music), and it can get beautifully noisy in English! In doing so they use much more body language; they practice selective listening; they enunciate key words over and over again; and the less advanced get the chance to steal words from the more advanced as they overhear them. Another important side effect is that students also avoid the use of their native language since everyone--especially the teacher, can hear them.

The Multi-partner Walk-talk

When I realized that every time they changed partners they were using the same language in real communication, I became greedy and asked myself how I could have them talk to a lot of people using the same language content within a short time and in an orderly fashion. I had done marketplace questionnaires with students milling about, but a few always seemed to get lost in the corner, silently communing with the wallpaper. The above changing of partners also got confusing when I tried to give them a third and fourth partner while they all remained seated. So I experimented with having them go do a "walk-talk" in a circle.

The multi-partner walk-talk can be done inside the classroom (by pushing a few chairs around) or outside, (weather and administration permitting). Students simply stand beside a partner and the whole class forms a double circle. Then they walk and talk, exchanging information. After a short time, the teacher claps or stops the music and asks the people on the inside circle to move toward one person. Then they walk and talk again.

Students love doing "walk-talks," especially after a long weekend or vacation period, because then they can find out what everyone did during the break. I tell them they have only a minute or two with each partner (and this gets them to speak faster). However, I usually give two minutes for the first partners since at first they are searching for things to say. Then I reduce the time with later partners. Depending on the content and timing, I may let them go on until they have talked to five or six people or until they have gotten back to their original partner. In a class of 20, it usually takes only fifteen minutes for students to go all the way around. The students within the two circles know what everyone did, and they can now tell each other what they remember. So the information is recycled one more time.

Many students have been amazed at how much easier it is to walk and talk than it is to simply sit. Somehow, moving their bodies allows their brains to access more information and they talk more. Several students also commented that while they were walking, the occasional silences were not as uncomfortable as when they were sitting. (See also Murphey 1995.)

Homework Recycling

There are at least three ways that I can get students to use the material realistically for homework. (*1*) My students write action logs (Murphey 1993) about the class activities so the information is reviewed again in writing, and I get to find out how they liked the activities. (*2*) I may also give them homework to telephone (Murphey 1992) a classmate and tell them the information that impressed them in the walk-talk or in other activities. (*3*) Finally, I may ask them to teach the information to a family member or friend and write about it in their "action log" (Hayashi and Murphey 1993).

Sharing the Rationale

Older students who have had years of conventional education will sometimes think these activities are silly. Explaining the rationale behind them allows students to relax and they start to enjoy themselves. After doing these activities a few times, I usually ask my students to tell me what the advantages are and we enter into a general discussion. They then quiet their criticism and doubts and get on with learning because they are convinced that person-to-person interaction is both an enjoyable and a great way to improve language abilities. So tell them what you're doing and why, and you'll calm their doubts.

We need recycling of learning material and it needs to be as meaningful and as enjoyable as possible. This is true also for teachers' learning. When you really want to understand the information in this article (or any article), tell it to at least three other people. Photocopy it and give it to colleagues. And when you follow the suggestions in your classes, adapt them to your own particular style and situation, and see how they work. The experience teaches you; and the repeated experience makes it yours.

Tim Murphey teaches at Nanzan University. He is the author of Teaching One to One and Music and Song.

References

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